

“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets...”

Based on Luke 16: 1-13

by Rev. Meghan Davis

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Money, possessions, the last shall be first... a prominent theme in Luke’s gospel. And nowhere is that theme more explicitly articulated than this parable. In this parable, Jesus re-visits the reversal of fortune of which Mary sang in the Magnificat, God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; [God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”¹ Through Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus puts flesh on his sayings from the Sermon on the Plain, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh....Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.”²

It’s an odd parable, isn’t it? This is the only parable where a character gets a name—the wretchedly poor Lazarus. Poor Lazarus, at the receiving end of one of the most graphically gruesome images in the gospels: the dogs licking his wounds, which surely didn’t help his wounds heal at all. I can’t help but wonder if Lazarus welcomed the licking, as the closest he came to compassion. And then there’s this vision of Father Abraham presiding over the heavenly realm which is visible from Hades, also not a concept that has “stuck” in common Christian thought. And the rich man’s request to have Lazarus go back and warn the man’s brothers of the fate they’d face. I wonder if Charles Dickens got his idea for *A Christmas Carol* from this story....

The unnamed rich man—his purple clothing indicates he was likely a member of royalty. He is not depicted as being particularly mean or evil, he was simply unaware, blind to the existence of the desperately poor man, starving outside his gated community. Even after death, though the rich man seems humbled by the reversal of fortune, he speaks directly to Abraham, speaking of Lazarus in the third person, asking for Lazarus, in effect, to serve him: “send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.”³ Having been denied, he then asks, “father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house -- for I have five brothers -- that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.”⁴

It has been suggested that as modern communication and technology continues to shrink the size of our global village, we are no more aware of Lazarus in our midst than was the rich man. We are no less blind to the suffering in the world and perhaps, thanks to globalization, those of us at the top of the world’s socio-economic pyramid are contributing as much as ever, if not more so than before. As one theologian writes, we are able to remain conveniently blind to “the invisible suffering in our world: the women and children in sweatshops, who are invisible behind the labels we buy; the suffering of animals in factory farms, who are invisible behind our fast food; the suffering of the suspect who is tortured behind locked doors to calm our cancerous fears[.] We live within political and economic systems that feed upon the sufferings of others, all the while keeping

¹ Luke 1:52-53

² Luke 6:20-25

³ Luke 16:24

⁴ Luke 16:27-28

those sufferings invisible. The call of Christ is to refuse to live any longer by those convenient fabrications.”⁵

This parable serves as a wonderful opportunity to preach on mission or even stewardship. But today, I’m thinking about a hunger of another kind, yet no less important: the hunger for social justice. Just like the rich man in the parable, we can be conveniently blind to social injustice taking place right under our noses. Or perhaps we are aware of it but, for whatever reason, we do nothing to counteract it. And we’re always able to come up with a handful of reasons not to act or speak out such as: there’s nothing I can do, it doesn’t effect me, the problem is just too big. And when I say “we,” of course, I include myself in the indictment. Troubled though I’ve been about our country’s rise of anti-Muslim sentiment, I have done little to counteract it. But this week I was prodded out of my complacency.

One of my former seminary classmates sent an e-mail to several of us asking a church related question. Of the several responses to the original question, one person responded to the question at hand and then added, "I did hear the PCUSA made a statement about the Mosque in NY tho [*sic.*] and it is making lots of people mad around here because they are in support of the building of the Mosque. [I presume he meant to say they are not in support of the building...] Now whether one supports the building of it or not I don't care, but I get disgusted when Louisville makes a statement on a controversial issue and small rural churches have to fight amongst themselves in order to say whether they agree or disagree."

Now, I have to tell you, this short e-mail contained so many affronts to my sensibilities as a Christian, as an American, as a Presbyterian, and as a basically decent human being, it made my head almost explode.

In a search of the denomination’s website for the statement referenced, I discovered a statement issued on September 8 titled, “A call for respect for Muslim neighbors”⁶ issued by Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, and Linda Valentine, Executive Director of the General Assembly Mission Council. The statement reads:

“As we are nearing the anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, we continue our prayers for those who lost their lives or were injured, as well as their loved ones. At the same time, we join with others in expressing deep concern about the anti-Muslim sentiments and actions that are being expressed across the country in general and about the building of Cordoba House⁷ and mosque near the site of the former World Trade Center in New York City in particular.

“We are keenly aware that many Muslims, as well as Jews, Christians, Hindus, Presbyterians and others, lost family members in the attacks on September 11, 2001. We recognize, as does the Muslim community around the world, that a group of Muslims who embraced terrorism and teachings counter to the Qur’an and Islam carried out the attacks.

⁵ Scott Bader-Saye. *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 118

⁶ <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2010/9/8/call-respect-muslim-neighbors/>

⁷ The called the “Ground Zero Mosque” by opponents its construction.

“We stand with the majority of Muslims—including American Muslims—who are working against such radical influences in their communities. They have our support for building the Cordoba House as a community center dedicated to learning, compassion, and respect for all people. Their effort is consistent with our country’s principle of freedom of religion and the rights all citizens should enjoy.”

So here are just a few of the things that bother me about the e-mail from my colleague. For one thing, the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque”⁸ is not a mosque but a community center. It’s not at Ground Zero but two big New York City blocks away from the furthest corner of the sixteen acre site of the former World Trade Center and even further from where the Twin Towers stood. The proposed community center would be built where an abandoned Burlington Coat Factory now stands and would likely revitalize an area of the city that has been a virtual ghost town since the attacks of 2001.

We don’t consider all white American males terrorists for the actions of Timothy McVeigh and Ted Kazinsky. And it makes no more sense to label all of Islam as terrorists for the regrettable actions of a few. This Islamaphobia, remarkably higher now, nine years after the attacks of 9/11 than in the weeks and months immediately following, frightens me in it’s similarity to the atmosphere that led to the rise of the Nazi party in pre-WWII Germany.

Furthermore, I find it disturbing that people opposing the building of the community center, people who consider themselves patriotic Americans would so blatantly disregard some of the most important freedoms which the Pilgrims sought and for which the Revolutionaries fought which are protected by the Constitution of the United States of America: freedom of religion, freedom of speech and the right to assembly.

Aside from the basic facts and the civic incongruity of opposing the right of anyone to worship, my understanding is that the Jesus I read about in the Bible would speak out against the hypocrisy of those professing to be Christian who disregard God’s commandment from the Hebrew Scriptures “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien for you were aliens in the land of Egypt”⁹ and his own commandments to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”¹⁰ and “love your neighbor as yourself.”¹¹

One of the hallmarks of the PC(USA) is our history of Christian witness rooted in a sense of call and mission to speak out on matters of social justice, as our *Book of Order* states: “participating in God’s activity in the world through its life for others by a) healing and reconciling and binding up wounds...c) engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger, and injustice, d) giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer, e) sharing with Christ in establishing of his just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world.”¹² Additionally, the *Book of Order* states that “The Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life...and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves...”¹³

8

⁹ Exodus 22:21

¹⁰ Matthew 5:44

¹¹ Matthew 19:19, Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, not to mention Leviticus 19:18, Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14 and James 2:8

¹² G-3.0300.c.3

¹³ G-3.0400

And then there's the Confession of 1967 the most recent in the *Book of Confessions* which states that "God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In [God's] reconciling love, [God] overcomes the barriers between brothers [and sisters] and breaks down every form of discrimination...The church is called to bring all [people] to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life...*Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate or patronize their fellowmen, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess.*"¹⁴ (emphasis added)

Now, I don't expect every member of every Presbyterian Church to agree with every stand the denomination takes. I don't expect every pastor to agree with every statement that comes out of the denomination's headquarters in Louisville. However, in seeking ordination as minister of word and sacrament I understood that while I may not always agree with decisions made and statements issued by the denomination (for instance current views on human sexuality, marriage, ordination standards and even the above mentioned statement which I wish were stronger), I do believe in the Spirit in which the decisions and statements are made. I do not seek a church that does not take risks or make waves. I do not seek a church of the least common denominator. I answered God's call to this denomination and indeed to this very congregation because I believe in the basic ethos of the PC(USA) in its history of prophetic witness on matters of social importance.

When looking on the PC(USA) website for the statement from the office of General Assembly, I also found an article titled, "A time for Christian witness"¹⁵ In the article, addressing the rise of anti-Muslim rhetoric in general and the proposed Qur'an burning in Florida in particular, Charles Wiley, coordinator for the Office of Theology and Worship notes, "Consistently the Presbyterian Church has stood for respect for all of our neighbors" and "It is part of our witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ to treat with respect our neighbors of other faiths. I'm grateful for [the] recent statement...that speaks clearly to Presbyterian values in the midst of growing anti-Muslim rhetoric and actions and plans of some church leaders and members in our country."

Martin Niemoller, a German Protestant pastor and social activist imprisoned by the Nazis in 1937 wrote this poem, familiar to many:

When the Nazis came for the communists,
I remained silent;
I was not a communist.

When they locked up the social democrats,
I remained silent;
I was not a social democrat.

When they came for the trade unionist,
I did not speak out;
I was not a trade unionist.

When they came for the Jews,
I remained silent;
I wasn't a Jew.

¹⁴ 9.44

¹⁵ <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2010/9/10/time-christian-witness/>

When they came for me,
there was no one left to speak out.

When they came for the Muslims, I remained silent; I wasn't a Muslim. In the parable, Abraham—not God and not Jesus—is the judge. Father Abraham. Father of the Jewish faith. Father of the Christian faith. Father of the Muslim faith. The rich man is not condemned for being rich. He is condemned for being blind to the suffering around him. He is condemned for feasting while Lazarus hungers. He is condemned for doing nothing. How then can we, free to worship when, where and in the manner we please, do nothing while our Muslim brothers and sisters fight for their rights to do the same, in a country founded on the principle of these very freedoms?